

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING

RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE:
IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Nury Turkel, Chair
Abraham Cooper, Vice Chair
David Curry
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Sharon Kleinbaum
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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR TURKEL: Good morning and welcome to today's hearing on "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom," hosted by the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom, or commonly known as USCIRF.

This hearing will examine the religious dimension of Russia's war and the impact of its discriminatory policies against a growing list of religious minorities in Ukraine and Russia.

I am Nury Turkel, the chair of USCIRF, an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government body created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA.

USCIRF's mandate is to monitor religious freedom abroad, using international standards, and to make policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important hearing.

Since Russian President Vladimir Putin's

invasion, full-scale invasion, unprovoked war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, thousands of civilians have been killed, millions have been displaced, and Ukrainians throughout the country have experienced gross human rights violations, including religious freedom violations.

The Russian military has indiscriminately bombed churches, monasteries, kingdom halls, mosques, synagogues, cemeteries, and other religious sites, and the Russian soldiers have abducted and tortured religious figures because of their leadership role.

In one case, Russian soldiers detained Crimean Tatar Imam Rustem Asanov in the region of Kherson after he organized peaceful protests against Russian occupation.

They put a bag over his head and took him to a basement where they beat, strangled, and chastised him for setting the "wrong example" for his religious community.

It is also important to note that Russia's religious freedom violations in Ukraine are not

new. In the parts of Ukraine occupied and controlled by Russian forces since 2014, we have seen Russia effectively export the religious freedom violations it has long committed within its own borders, including banning religious groups as "extremist," issuing lengthy prison sentences for peaceful religious activities, and prohibiting religious literature.

In the nine years since Russia illegally seized Crimea, its de facto authorities have brutally targeted Crimea's predominantly Muslim Tatar population.

Numerous Tatars have received staggering prison sentences—in some cases nearly two decades—on dubious charges linked to their Muslim identity and principled opposition to Russian occupation.

Imprisoned Tatars have also faced severe medical neglect and inhumane living conditions in prison, with one activist, Dzhemil Gafarov, sadly dying in prison last month despite his well-known preexisting health conditions.

At the same time, Russia has doubled down

on the repression of its own citizens' religious freedom and other related human rights and fundamental freedoms through an array of legislation punishing and curtailing religious activities, expression, LGBTQI identity, and independent media, just to name a few.

As I come to the end of my opening remarks, I would like to take a moment to remember my good friend Jason Morton, who left us way too soon, after serving many years as a Senior Analyst covering Russia, and we all benefited from his incredible work, expertise and legacy that significantly contributed to today's hearing.

It is my great pleasure to turn the virtual floor over to USCIRF's Vice Chair, Abraham Cooper, who will be moderating today's hearing.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: You're muted, Abe.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Chair Turkel, and on behalf of your fellow commissioners, I want to thank you for being an inspiration everyday in the cause of religious freedom and

human rights around the world, and also on behalf of my fellow commissioners, I also want to thank the distinguished witnesses who are joining us for today and to welcome viewers from around the world who are joining us live.

As part and parcel of Russia's horrific war, Russian officials and pro-Kremlin propagandists have launched a massive disinformation campaign in the futile effort to convince its people and the people around the world that its invasion of the Ukraine is just.

Disturbingly, the Russian government has repeatedly turned to shocking examples of anti-semitic rhetoric and Holocaust distortion as part of that effort.

When President Putin announced his country's invasion of Ukraine, he falsely claimed that the goal of his so-called, quote-unquote, "special military operation," was to, quote-unquote, "demilitarize and denazify Ukraine."

We know there is no such justification for Russia's aggression against its neighbor and that

such claims against Ukraine have no basis in reality.

However, we can also not ignore the pernicious antisemitism of these statements. Russian officials know it doesn't make sense to claim to "denazify" a country with a leader whose father is Jewish. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy himself lost members at the hands of the Nazis during the Holocaust.

Yet, this has not stopped high-ranking Russian officials from promoting these bogus lies. When confronted about President Zelenskyy's Jewishness, and the denazification narrative, no one less than Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov replied with more hateful rhetoric, blaming the Jewish people for the Holocaust.

This is just one example of many official Russian statements intended to hijack the truth, history, and the memory of the Shoah, the Nazi Holocaust, for its own twisted political agenda.

And it's not limited to just words and rhetoric. Russian forces attacking Ukraine have

also physically desecrated Holocaust remembrance sites and sadly killed Holocaust survivors.

Early in the war, Russian missiles damaged the grounds of the Babyn Yar Memorial Center in Kyiv, which memorializes the location where Nazi Germany and local collaborators murdered more than 33,000 Jews over the course of just two days in 1941.

The Russian military also damaged a menorah at the Drobitsky Yar Holocaust Memorial Complex in Kharkiv, a site that memorializes the lives of 15,000 Jews who were murdered there.

Neither has the Russian government limited its rhetoric to so-called "denazification." One Russian official went so far as to call for the "desatanization of Ukraine," referring to several religious groups like the Church of Scientology and the Chabad Lubavitch movement as, quote-unquote, "neo-pagan cults," promoted by Ukrainian government that had forced its citizens to abandon, quote-unquote, "traditional religious values."

Desatanization should be understood as

nothing less than the elimination of Ukraine's flourishing religious diversity.

It moreover foreshadows the harsh treatment these groups would, God forbid, face under Russian rule.

The Russian government's hateful rhetoric and actions towards Ukrainians speaks volumes as to why the fight against Russian disinformation, distortion of the Nazi Holocaust, and antisemitism must continue hand-in-hand with the efforts to hold the Russian government fully accountable for their crime.

With that, I would like to turn the floor over to my colleague, USCIRF Commissioner Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, who would like to add additional comments.

Commissioner Kleinbaum.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Thank you. Thank you so much, Chair Turkel and Vice Chair Cooper, and thank you to all of you who are here today.

I had the opportunity last year to visit Ukraine in my personal capacity and was deeply

moved and inspired by the Ukrainian people's resolve in the face of such tragic suffering.

Russia's religious freedom violations in Ukraine should come as no surprise as the Russian government is using the same repressive playbook that it has used for years inside Russia itself.

Several draconian Russian laws outlaw the most basic fundamentals of religious freedom. Russia's 1997 religion law sets strict registration requirements for all religious groups and empowers state officials to impede and monitor their activities.

Russia's so-called "Yarovaya Law" bans preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites.

Russian courts have also increasingly designated religious groups as "extremist" without adequately defining the term or "terrorist" without providing any evidence of terrorist activities or the promotion of violence.

Russia is also Europe's biggest enforcer

of blasphemy, consistently fining and detaining people for comments and activities perceived as "insulting religious feelings," quote-unquote.

These are just a few examples of the many ways that Russia has used broad, vague legislation to suppress religious activities and groups of which the state does not approve.

The prosecution of religious groups and other vulnerable communities in Russia has not slowed down despite the war. 2022 was one of the harshest years of repression for Jehovah's Witnesses, with Russia sentencing more than 40 to real prison time and detaining or imprisoning more than 100 for peaceful religious activities.

Muslims continue to make up a significant number of Russia's political prisoners with the international human rights organization Memorial documenting the cases of hundreds of Muslims who have been imprisoned for their religious affiliations, activities, and identity.

On top of that, the Russian government has launched a sweeping crackdown on civil society

forcing several human rights organizations that monitor and report on religious freedom to suspend their operations and flee the country.

In April 2022, the Memorial Human Rights Center was shut down after a court-ordered closure under the country's "foreign agents" law.

Other organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Moscow Helsinki Group, were also forced to suspend operations inside the country, making it more difficult to monitor and document freedom of religion or belief and other related human rights violations.

President Putin has also weaponized religious nationalism and pushed through new, stricter legislation that further curtails freedom of religion or belief. President Putin has made his vision of "faith and traditional values," quote-unquote, a rallying cry for the war, scapegoating the LGBTQI+ community.

Last December, he signed into law a bill that criminalized "LGBT propaganda," quote-unquote, and the promotion of "non-traditional sexual

relations," quote-unquote.

Religious communities which comprise members of various sexual orientations and gender identities have the right to support their members publicly and express views about sexual morality freely without fear of reprisal.

Using the LGBTQI+ community and its allies as political fodder to rally domestic support is yet another tactic often used by despots to hold on to power.

I look forward to hearing from our panelists today about all these developments, and now I turn the floor back to you. I think it is now Vice Chair Cooper who will be moderating our panel.

Thank you so much.

Abe, you are muted.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you,
Commissioner Kleinbaum.

I want to, for those who are watching around the world, to emphasize that USCIRF was established through an act of Congress, and as

such, our connections with Capitol Hill and the senators and congress people, who are committed to human rights. Relationships are extremely important, and, therefore, it's a special honor at this point to ask Senator Roger Wicker, the Ranking Member of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, who's provided prerecorded remarks for this hearing.

Senator Wicker.

SENATOR WICKER: [Pre-recorded remarks.]

Good morning, Chairman Turkel, commissioners, and distinguished witnesses.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak on the importance of holding accountable one of the worst international violators of religious freedom—the Russian federation.

For years, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has warned the public about President Vladimir Putin's efforts to restrict peaceful religious activity.

Allowing these actions to go unchallenged

would give this dictator a green light to escalate his repression.

When agents of the Russian Federation began restricting peaceful religious activities in Crimea, Senator Shaheen and I introduced the Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act.

The Kremlin's renewed all-out assault on Ukraine reveals Putin's goals. He wants to go back to the old Soviet Empire by any means necessary. Domestically, President Putin has leveraged the religious nationalism of the Russian people for his own cause.

He has framed the war in religious terms and set his own people against Ukraine. One of his most prominent propagandists is Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Patriarch has urged Russians to side with the persecutor over the persecuted. No authentic theologian would endorse such flagrant violations of human rights.

In fact, it is appropriate for the United States and European partners to consider whether

Kirill himself should face sanctions.

Despite the Kremlin's claims, it is Russia's forces who have kidnapped, tortured, and killed religious leaders and destroyed places of worship.

As Commissioner Sharon Kleinbaum aptly noted, Russia has effectively exported to Ukraine the religious freedom violations it has long inflicted on its own citizens at home.

It is incumbent on the free world to call out the Kremlin for this terror and work to hold Vladimir Putin accountable.

I appreciate the work this Commission is doing to shed light on this ongoing injustice.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Senator Wicker, for your remarks, which is the perfect lead-in to our distinguished witnesses who will be speaking to us from around the world.

We'll hear from Dmytro Vovk, Visiting Associate Professor at Cardozo School of Law and member of the OSCE Office for Democratic

Institutions and Human Rights Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

We'll then hear from Rachel Denber, Deputy Director of Europe and Central Asia Division at Human Rights Watch; former prisoner of conscience Dennis Christensen; and Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, exiled Chief Rabbi of Moscow and President of the Conference of European Rabbis.

In addition, USCIRF Commissioner David Curry will also read testimony from a Crimean Tatar activist, who would otherwise face retribution for his testimony.

I would like now to invite on behalf of our Commission and our commissioners Dmytro Vovk to begin his testimony.

MR. VOVK: Hello, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important event.

I should start by saying that contemporary Ukraine and Russia are antipodes in many aspects, including the situation with religious freedom.

While Ukraine has one of the most liberal

religious legislations in the region And a highly competitive religious market, Russia has managed to create a very restrictive religious legal framework with one religion, the Russian Orthodox Church, being strongly endorsed and many religious minorities being severely discriminated against and oppressed.

The Russia-Ukraine war, starting with the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine and continuing with Russia's full-scale invasion, has had a tremendous effect on freedom of religion or belief and other related human rights in the region.

Murders, tortures, including fake executions, forced detention, and forced displacement of priests and believers, acts of vandalism, religious discrimination and social hatred of religious minorities inspired and directed by Russian proxies, and then by occupational administration, as well as expropriations of religious properties, have become the reality of the territories occupied by Russian

in 2014 and then in 2022.

Religious regimes established on the occupied territories, however, have not been homogeneous. While in Crimea, the Russian government has planted the whole spectrum of religious restrictions, previously implemented inside the Russian Federation, in Eastern Ukraine these restrictions and repressions have been accompanied by numerous acts of pure violence committed by the Russian military and paramilitary groups.

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Russia has continued to engage in religious repressions in newly occupied territories.

Human rights monitors reported searches in Greek Catholic, Protestant, Jehovah's Witnesses communities' premises, as well as in parishes belonging to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

At least 26 religious figures, including military chaplains, were murdered. Many more Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Protestant priests

and believers were detained, tortured, and subjected to humiliating treatment.

Many religious properties were captured and used for military or other purposes, such as sniper nests. Several religious buildings were looted and decimated, as well as religious items, including cases of burnt Bibles in protestant churches and shot through icons in Orthodox churches and damaged signs of Holocaust remembrance.

In addition, according to the Kyiv-based Institute of Religious Freedom's report, since February 2022, the Russian military destroyed and damaged about 500 religious buildings.

A bitter irony is that almost a third of these buildings belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church historically and ecclesiastically affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate.

In his speech of February 21 of 2022, Vladimir Putin accused the Ukrainian government of alleged preparations to destruct the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. As we

have already seen, Putin decided to prevent this "destruction"—in quotes, of course—by the Russian army's ruining Ukrainian Orthodox Church buildings and murdering its believers, which denomination constitutes the religious majority in eastern and southern Ukraine.

The relationship between the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in times of war is also an important topic.

We know that the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, primarily Moscow Patriarch Kirill, has blessed and endorsed Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine.

Given that, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church links to Moscow, even though the church insists on its full independence now, are perceived extremely negative by Ukrainian society.

There are also cases of Moscow Patriarchate priests' collaboration with the Russian troops and occupation administrations. The Security Service of Ukraine reported 60 criminal

cases against Ukrainian Orthodox Church clerics being involved in spying, the justification of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and the incitement of religious hatred on occupied territories.

At least two of those clerics were traded with Russia in prison exchanges by the request of the Russian side.

These cases are among the reasons why President Zelensky requested the Cabinet of Ministers to develop a draft law on banning religious organizations affiliated with Russia.

This draft law was submitted to the Ukrainian Parliament in January and is expected to be adopted this month.

This means that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate and some other, significantly smaller, religious groups can potentially be banned based on this law.

This is a religious-freedom-related topic. On the one hand, religious freedom is not in any way an excuse for calls to violate state

sovereignty or territorial integrity or for collaboration with Russian military forces.

On the other hand, international human rights standards emphasize that, while counteracting national security threats, the government should focus on concrete individuals involved in illegal activities, not on the whole religious group or religion in general.

Overall, it's Russia's occupied territories that produce the biggest challenge to religious freedom in Ukraine. The bloody Russian attack against Ukraine has turned one of the most religiously pluralist Ukrainian regions into the territory of the grossest violations of religious freedom in Europe.

Several religious groups, which had been flourishing before 2014, have disappeared or left the occupied territories and many of them presumably will never come back even when the war is over.

Given that, I recommend the Commission to do the following:

First, keep monitoring the situation and produce an analytical report focused on religious freedom violations in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia in order to raise awareness about this case globally.

Recommend that initiation of sanctions and travel bans against persons involved in violations of religious freedom in Russia and the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia, including the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Moscow Patriarch Kirill personally.

Encourage Congress to earmark funds for restoring Ukraine's cultural sites, including religious buildings of historical and cultural significance.

Facilitate legal support for the Ukrainian government regarding the development of legislation dealing with national security issues in the religious domain.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Professor.

I just want to add that Professor Vovk has

been a religious freedom expert for several international and European institutions, as well as the Constitutional Court of Ukraine and the Ukrainian State Agency for Ethnic Policies and Freedom of Conscience.

I'm sure in the Q&A part of our session we'll be talking and asking questions in this domain as well, and, please God, we can talk about the day after the war when legal and other issues are going to come to the fore.

Thank you for your presentation.

Rachel Denber is the Deputy Director of the Europe and Central Asia Division specializing in countries of the Former Soviet Union for Human Rights Watch.

Previously, she directed Human Rights Watch's Moscow Office and did field research and advocacy in Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Estonia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

She has authored reports on a wide range of human rights issues throughout the region.

Denber earned a bachelor's degree from Rutgers University in international relations and a master's degree in political science from Columbia University where she studied at the Harriman Institute.

She speaks Russian and French. Since I don't, my hope is that your important presentation will now follow in English. So I wanted to ask you to make your presentation.

MS. DENBER: Absolutely. Thank you very much, Commissioner Cooper. Thank you very much to the members of the Commission for inviting me to testify at this important hearing.

In the year since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as has already been mentioned, its forces have perpetrated a catalogue of atrocities and other abuses there which Human Rights Watch has documented extensively, and I invite you to have a look at our website where you'll see that documentation.

At home in Russia, the Kremlin is trying to decimate what had been a robust and vibrant

civil society and laid waste to key fundamental freedoms.

It's important to note that the muzzling of Russian citizens did not emerge in a vacuum but is the result of a decade of step-by-step repression that started in 2012 and that accelerated in critical moments: in 2014, when Russia's war against Ukraine actually started; in 2018; and in 2020, this repression at home escalated.

And then, of course, with the full-scale invasion in 2022, the Kremlin has sought to militarize Russian society and is really seeking to double-down in an all-out drive to eradicate public dissent.

Russian public life is unrecognizable as compared to even 18 months ago when authoritarian autocracy was already deeply entrenched.

I'll describe a couple of key elements of this endeavor, but, first, let me say that efforts to annihilate civil society related to religious persecution in three main ways.

First, the authorities abuse Russia's extremism and terrorism laws to persecute religious minorities and also to silence secular critics.

Second, the dismantling of civil society means eradicating autonomous initiatives that have an approach to public affairs that differs from that of the authorities, or that outright challenge them. The authorities are deeply suspicious of institutions, whether they're non-governmental organizations or religious confessions or political parties, institutions that they do not control.

Third, the authorities aggressively push "traditional Russian values" and demonize culture and ideas that they deem at variance with these values. So if the government can't control a religious community, the impulse is to deem it a threat to "Russian traditional values."

The Kremlin has gone about decimating or trying to decimate civil society largely through the adoption and enforcement of a web of repressive laws. Most recently, these have been the war censorship laws, but the centerpiece for the past

decade really has been the "foreign agents' legislation," and the "undesirable" foreign organizations law and extremism and terrorism laws have also played a role.

I will highlight a couple of these, but for fuller description, please see my written testimony, which I have submitted for the record.

Look, you know, we can't predict the future of Russia's war against Ukraine. We can't predict what the future steps are that the Kremlin will take to punish dissent. There is still space for it to escalate. And we also can't predict when it is that prospects for civil society in Russia will improve.

But we don't need to know the answers to these questions to know that the future of fundamental freedoms in Russia is with Russia's independent activists and voices, those who remain in Russia and those who are in exile now.

And my recommendation is the U.S. needs to support these independent activists, these human rights activists, the human rights movement, by

ensuring that their projects are funded, by expanding scholarships, fellowships, apprenticeships, and other opportunities in the United States, and by ensuring that human rights activists can secure multi-year, multi-entry visas. They need and they deserve your support.

Now the most, the most recent and radical tool that the government has used against civil society has been the war censorship laws, which have largely eviscerated freedom of expression in Russia, and these laws effectively criminalize any speech critical of the war or Russian forces conduct. Maximum penalty is 15 years in prison.

Discrediting the actions of any Russian state agency abroad or any entities or individuals who are fighting on the Russian side is also punishable by a prison sentence.

These laws are—there's been an exodus of independent Russian and foreign media outlets, which actually started before the invasion and continued after the laws' adoption.

Currently, numbers vary, but hundreds are

facing criminal prosecution under these laws. Thousands have faced numerous administrative offense charges. These charges are a convenient tool against prominent opposition figures who are now behind bars, such as Ilya Yashin, who just got an eight-and-a-half year prison sentence and also Aleksey Gorinov, and there are others.

The Russian authorities don't need to resort to war censorship to lock up opposition leaders. Vladimir Kara-Murza, who has testified numerous times in Congress repeatedly, is now, right now on trial on treason charges for statements that he made opposing the war, and he's facing 24 years.

The authorities have used these charges, these war censorship charges, to detain and fine individuals who have publicly held posters or made inscriptions with the Sixth Commandment, Thou Shalt Not Kill, or with biblical verse to protest the war.

We're aware of several cases in which clergy have been charged or fined for making anti-

war statements in their sermons.

And I know, as this Commission has previously reported, a priest, Dmitry Kurmoyarov, is in pretrial detention for stating on video that Russian soldiers in Ukraine will not go to heaven.

A second key law has been the foreign agents legislation. As I mentioned, it's been in force for 11 years now, and it requires any organization that gets any kind of foreign funding or now any support, whether it's financial or just training, or is deemed by the Russian authorities to be under foreign influence, to register as a foreign agent, and they face very onerous reporting requirements and inspections.

And, currently, under the most recent iteration of this law, any, any legal entity, any individual, whether they're Russian, whether they're foreign, can be, you know, can be listed as a foreign agent.

It's a radical law now. People who are foreign agents are now excluded from public life. They're banned from civil service. They're banned

from teaching in schools. Hundreds of people and organizations have been designated, including, as I believe Rabbi Kleinbaum has mentioned, Memorial, one of Russia's oldest and most-venerated human rights groups, liquidated in early-sorry, late 2021. One of their key projects has been to maintain a database of political prisoners and victims of religious persecution.

I want to assure you that this work is continuing. Of course, they have registered outside of Russia. They have a new name. Now it's Center for Human Rights Memorial, but they continue this work from abroad and from inside Russia, and I urge you to subscribe to its Telegram channel, which is imbedded in my written testimony.

The "undesirable" foreign organizations law is another tool in the repressive toolkit, and this allows the Prosecutor General's Office to designate any foreign international organization as undesirable if it allegedly undermines Russian security. Any Russian citizen who continues any kind of broadly conceived involvement with these

kinds of organizations can face a criminal penalty including a six-year prison term.

There are 74 organizations now blacklisted as undesirable. These include—about a third of them are American donor organizations. There are also some think tanks. They also include the National Democratic Institute and, in a bit of unwitting bipartisanship, the International Republican Institute.

Russia has, the authorities have abused Russia's extremism laws, and they've done this for years, to target individuals who pose no actual threat, who are simply viewed as politically inconvenient, and, of course, this is the same body of law that the authorities have used to imprison or to criminally prosecute hundreds, hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses, and to imprison them, including Dennis Christensen, who will be addressing us very soon.

Perhaps the most prominent figure from the secular opposition who was targeted under extremism law is Alexei Navalny, because his organizations

have been designated as extremist, and I think it's important, you know, even though Navalny is a figure who has been in the limelight, it's important to understand that there are hundreds of others who are targeted with the extremism law because of their alleged affiliation with his organizations, and one of them is currently behind bars. That's Lilia Chanyшева, who was the head of one of his groups in Ufa.

Let me wrap up there, and I look forward to hearing the other experts and to your questions.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you very much, Dr. Denber, for that sobering and detailed report, and, yes, I'm sure we'll be coming back to you during the Q&A session with the commissioners.

I think, like many of the people on this Commission, I visited the Soviet Union many decades ago, and I visited with many Jewish prisoners of conscience in six cities of what was then the Soviet Union.

It is almost beyond belief that here we are in the post-Soviet period, and we're talking

yet again about prisoners of conscience.

In this case, our next witness is probably someone who would never have wanted to—never dreamed he would have such a designation, but Dennis Christensen is a former religious prisoner of conscience, and the first Jehovah's Witness to be convicted and imprisoned in Russia after its Supreme Court in 2017 labeled Jehovah's Witnesses, quote-unquote, "extremists" and banned their activities.

Incredibly, Christensen was arrested in May 2017 during a worship service and sentenced to six years in prison for, quote, "organizing the activities of an extremist organization"—unquote.

On May 24, 2022, Christensen was released after serving his sentence and subsequently deported to his homeland, Denmark.

Today, USCIRF is especially honored to ask this former religious prisoner of conscience to address our gathering.

Dennis.

MR. CHRISTENSEN: Thank you very much.

First of all, I would like to thank all members of this Commission for your sincere work and say that it's a great pleasure for me to be here and to testify on this hearing.

As you all know, my name is Dennis Christensen. I am 50-years-old, a Danish citizen. I lived in Russia from the year 2000 to 2022. I am one of Jehovah's Witnesses and have experienced the violation of religious freedom in my own life.

It began in the year 2007 when Russian authorities made a new law about extremism. After that, they began to ban some of our religious literature. The police came sometimes to our meetings and filmed all those who attended.

I could not really understand at that time why were they doing this. But it became more clear to me later. On the 25th of May the year 2017, the FSB came to our place of worship in Oryol. There were about 15 from the special forces with masks and weapons and 15 in civil clothes. They stopped our meeting, made a raid, questioned us all, and arrested me.

I was two years in a detention prison and experienced a lot of injustice. I think that the authorities did that with a purpose, a purpose to break me down. Because all of the Russian prison systems is based on breaking a person down so he would cooperate with the investigation and then plead guilty.

First of all, they didn't allow me to see or call my wife Irina. We were communicating for the first couple of months only by mail. They put me in a small prison cell for 23 hours a day, with only one hour's walk in a little yard.

I was not able to communicate with my family home in Denmark. The prison only allowed me to receive and send letters in Russian language.

They put me together with smokers, although I already told them that I am not smoking. In the detention prison, there was no hot water, and they only allowed us a warm bath once a week. In the wintertime, it was very, very cold in the prison cell, and I had to sleep with all my clothes on. I often got sick because of these conditions,

and the medical help that we could receive was very lacking.

They didn't care about us at all. You were no longer a human being. You were a prisoner. And all of the staff assumed that you were guilty; why else would you be in prison?

At the trial, I could see that they were not listening to me or to my attorneys. They used false witnesses and a secret hidden witness who was working for the FSB. They told a lot of lies about me and about my religion.

It was like that they had already made their own decision long time ago before the court case began. And I definitely knew that I was to receive six years of prison just for being one of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Unfortunately, I was the first, but not the last. Now this has happened all over Russia, and many are now in prison, including three of my good friends: Vladimir Melnik, Artur Putinzev, and Vladimir Piskarev.

They are all in the same prison where I

were, and they have been there for more than two years now.

They are accused of the same thing that I were. Right now they are having a hard time and struggling because of many health problems. I really feel for them because nothing has changed, and it just gets worse and worse.

The investigator has already told them that they would get six years of prison, just like me.

When I came to the prison camp in the year 2019, the vice director took me to his office and threatened me with punishment if I didn't stop complaining about the conditions and if I in any way continued to preach about my faith here in the prison camp. The director of the prison did also do this many, many times.

The Russian law is counting one day in the detention prison for one-and-a-half day. So when I came to the prison camp, I had already been doing half of my sentence of the six years and was ready to apply for release on a parole. But just after

one month, the administration put a knife in my closet, and then made a search. In that way, they tried to prevent my release on parole. But at the trial, the prosecutor and the judge, they believed in me and my story and released me on parole and give me a fine of 400,000 rubles.

This news came out all over the world, but I wasn't released. The administration sent me the day after to punishment cells, and there I found out that the prosecutor had appealed his own decision and demanded a new trial.

At that time, I could understand that the orders came from high above from Moscow, and that they were not playing fair play, and I was not going home before time.

To prevent me totally from being released on a parole, the administration later sent me on and on to punishment cells, and later to the cells for the severe violators. In there, I didn't have any contact with other prisoners and lost all my opportunities to call my wife and family on the phone.

I was there for ten months. As you already said, on the 24th of May 2022, I was released from prison, after the end of my six-year sentence, and deported to Denmark.

Of course, it's not possible in a short time to tell all about the injustices that happened in these years, but I really hope that the committee could see a picture of constant violation of religious freedom, deception, and no fair play at all. And, unfortunately, this goes on and on and are getting worse and worse.

Thank you so much for listening and for your great concern, and I would like to say again that it's a great honor for me to be here with all of you.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Dennis. God bless you for your faith and your humanity and decency. We're very inspired.

We have two more presentations by individuals whose lives were directly and are directly impacted by the current situation.

I am going to ask my colleague, Commissioner David Curry, to read the testimony of the Crimean Tatar activist who cannot personally be present on this hearing for fear of retribution from the authorities.

So, Commissioner Curry, if you would.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you so much, Vice Chair Cooper.

I've read this testimony. It's powerful. There are a few words that I may be a little clumsy with. I hope that doesn't distract from it too much.

I begin:

CRIMEAN TATAR ACTIVIST: [Statement read by Commissioner Curry.]

Dear Commission Members: Following the occupation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian Federation began broad-scale activities aimed at establishing full control over the territory of the peninsula and Crimea's civil society.

Obviously, the purpose of these activities is to suppress any resistance to the occupation and

the first step towards it is to crush civil society, including activists, independent journalists and anyone with an actively pro-Ukrainian stance, or subordinate it to the authorities.

The Russian Federation uses a variety of methods to achieve this goal: enforced disappearance of activists or members of their families; intimidation of activists by law enforcement agencies; convictions for bogus crimes; focus on the repression of the Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian communities in Crimea by closing down schools, discouraging the use of the mother tongue at school and other locations.

An essential element of this policy is the persecution of religious organizations and their members. Immediately after the occupation, the Russian Federation introduced its own legislation into the territory of Crimea. It is aimed, on one hand, at subordinating the independent religious organizations and establishing full control over them and, on the other, at repressing those

religious organizations and their members that refuse to yield.

One of the first requirements following the occupation was that of a mandatory re-registration of religious organizations and churches in conformity with the laws of the Russian Federation.

It should be noted that the most quickly registered organizations were the Simferopol and Crimean dioceses of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. That is the Orthodox churches officially collaborating with the Russian regime and currently supporting the war in Ukraine.

In the other case of the religious organizations, the process of re-registration was very difficult, among other reasons because the occupying authorities prolonged the registration process or dismissed applications on formal grounds.

Numerous organizations received decisions refusing them the registration or were unable to complete the registration process by January 1 of

2016, which was the deadline. And therefore they were dissolved.

Before the occupation, over 2,200 religious organizations were registered in Crimea, whereas, after the January 1st of 2016, fewer than 800 remained.

I would like to mention here that some of the religious organizations were registered only after they had agreed to collaborate with the Russian occupying authorities or after the governing bodies of these organizations had been replaced with ones favorable to the Russian Federation.

That was, for example, in the case of the spiritual directorate of Muslims of Crimea, the Muftiyat, associating most of the Crimean mosques and over 350 Muslim associations of Crimean Tatars.

Since the beginning of the occupation, the Russian authorities have exerted a huge pressure on both the Mejlis and the Muftijat through repeatedly recurring mosque searches and personal pressure on members of the Mejlis and the head of the Muftijat.

As a result of the pressure, the Muftijat agreed to re-register in conformity with Russian legislation and collaborate with the occupying authorities, which led to the establishment of the control over religious organizations of Crimean Tatars.

This entailed, among other things, a consent to the requirement of registration of all imams of Crimean mosques, which is contradictory to the norms of Islam.

It is also particularly worth noting that the occupying authorities use the Russian legislation pertaining to the field of combating terrorism and extremism in order to prosecute activists and believers outside the religious organizations recognized by Russian authorities.

There are two essential problems with the anti-extremist legislation. Firstly, the definition of extremism in the law is very broad and imprecise, which leaves a lot of room for interpretation and consequently arbitrariness.

Secondly, the law does not include the

condition of the use of violence for the organization to be considered extremist. This leads, in practice, to situations where just the membership in the organization included in the list of extremist organizations or sharing the views represented by the organization may result in the initiation of criminal or administrative proceedings against members of the organization or individuals sharing the views of the organization.

The Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami was included in the consolidated field list of terrorist organizations in 20—pardon me—in 2003, and the Tablighi Jamaat international religious association in 2009, which paved the way for persecuting Muslim believers from Crimea, above all Crimean Tatars.

It should be noted that neither of these organizations is deemed to be terrorist under Ukrainian legislation, and no member of these organizations participated in any terrorist or extremist activities either before or after the occupation of Crimea.

Until now, at least 120 Muslim believers

in Crimea have faced criminal prosecution for their beliefs under the anti-extremist and anti-terrorism legislation, and at least 96 of them are still imprisoned and are considered to be prisoners of conscience.

All criminal cases are initiated on bogus pretext and are considered in violation of the rules of a fair trial, including with the use of anonymous witnesses, many of whom are FSB officers; with the use of testimony obtained under duress; with the arguments of the accused not being taken into consideration.

Some prisoners of conscience have been tortured, for example, by failing, by the failure to provide medical aid to the arrested. That was how Dzhemil Gafarov, a prisoner of conscience sentenced to 13 years of imprisonment in connection with Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami--he died in prison in February, on February 10th of 2023.

The cases of political prisoners have broader social repercussions since it's not only the prisoners themselves who suffer but also their

children and families struggling to support themselves.

Neighbors and relatives of political prisoners also suffer intimidation by officers of law enforcement agencies. This affects the morale of the entire Crimean Tatar people, who as a whole finds itself in Crimea at a dead end, deprived of fundamental human rights by the Russian authoritarian regime.

I would like to say forcefully that persecution on grounds of membership in religious groups that are not recognized by the Russian Federation has a far more reaching goal.

It is to force the Crimean Tatar population that opposes the occupation and the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation to yield to the occupying authorities and accept the existing state of things.

By prosecuting the Crimean Tatar believers, Russia sends a message to the general public that no one is safe and anyone can be subjected to repression for their views regardless

of whether they actually committed any crime. [End of statement as read by Commissioner Curry.]

COMMISSIONER CURRY: That's the testimony.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Commissioner Curry and, thank you for serving and giving voice to the voiceless on behalf of the Crimean Tatar community. Very sobering indeed.

"Acharon acharon chaviv," we say in Hebrew, which means "last but not least."

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, one of the most effective defenders of the Jewish people and campaigners for human rights for decades, and a friend—full disclosure—, is the Chief Rabbi and President of the Conference of European Rabbis and exiled Chief Rabbi of Moscow.

The Conference of European Rabbis unites over 700 communal rabbis from Dublin to Khabarovsk. He heads the Moscow Rabbinical Court of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which he founded in 1989.

Rabbi Goldschmidt, as I can attest to

personally, has also represented Russian Jewish community politically and has published op-eds in the international media and addressed the U.S. Senate, the EU Parliament, Council of Europe, the Israeli Knesset, Oxford OSCE, and the Berlin Conference on Anti-Semitism, just to name a few.

We're grateful for Rabbi Goldschmidt making time to be with us today, and we look forward to his report. Rabbi.

RABBI GOLDSCHMIDT: Thank you, Abe.

Mr. Chairman, and commissioners, it is a great honor to be invited to testify in front of your commission dealing with religious freedom all over the world.

I've been blessed and privileged to take part in one of the most important moments of Jewish history, the last 30 years of renaissance, with Jewish life in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union still, arriving at the last days of Soviet Union in times of perestroika and glasnost, and taking part in the rebuilding of the Jewish community in modern Russia under Yeltsin and

afterwards under the current president.

However, as President Putin came to power, the system, the political system, became more and more authoritarian, and the way I said it in the press on the night between the 23rd of February to the 24th, when Russia unprovoked attacked and invaded Ukraine, the political system in Russia became from authoritarian to semi-totalitarian, almost totalitarian.

And deciding that it is impossible to support the war, and we got government repression to support the war, many religious leaders in Russia were pressured by the government to support the war, we decided that we cannot do it, or we'll not do it, and after I decided that being silent is also not enough, and I decided to leave the country in order to officially take a position against the war and criticize the war, which is a catastrophe, not only for Ukraine, but also for Russia, and for the Jewish communities of both countries.

But going back before the beginning of the war, and listening to the testimonies of other

religious leaders of other faiths, I must say that in terms of infringement of religious freedom, we have witnessed during the last 15 years that Russia has expelled more than 11 rabbis from communal rabbis of communities all over Russia and in Moscow, expelled almost always by the machinations of the FSB, the successor organizations of the KGB, and those communities have been left leaderless.

Since the beginning of the war, we witnessed, as Abe has said, a big assent of anti-Semitism. When we talk about anti-Semitism, it's not grass root anti-Semitism. It's not street anti-Semitism. It is governmental anti-Semitism.

It is governmental anti-Semitism, as it was said, the Holocaust distortion, and accusing Ukraine of being a Nazi or neo-Nazi regime, and, which is also an infringement on the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism, and the Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergey Lavrov, pretending Zelensky, the President of Ukraine, since he was Jewish, that he was also a Nazi, that Hitler was also of Jewish dissent.

We have seen also another manifestation of pressure against the Jewish community. This was the closure of the Jewish agency. As we know, the relationship between Israel and Russia has been in general very good, but since the beginning of the war, Israel could not take a neutral stance and criticized the invasion.

And right away, we saw that the Jewish community was pressured, and the government, the Ministry of Justice, set about to close the Jewish agency, a major part of the organized Jewish community dealing with immigration and formal and informal education.

And not only that, we have seen that government officials or through intermediaries have attacked one of the major presences of Jewish life in Russia, the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, in three different instances. The movement was attacked also by a senior government official of the National Security Council and also petitions organized locally in Samawa [ph], and lately also in Birobidzhan, in order to demand the closure of

the Chabad-Lubavitch communities and demand that its rabbi should be recognized as a foreign agent.

Now why has this been done, especially in Birobidzhan, in a far-out place with very few Jews left. Because in order, it should be impossible to accuse the authorities of antisemitism. The demand, the petition, came from the Jewish Autonomous Republic. Demand went to the governor of the Jewish Autonomous Republic. His name is Goldstein. I don't know if he's Jewish or not. But definitely of Jewish descent.

But those women reading this petition were, of course, government agents prompted by the government to do that. Nothing is happening in the streets of Moscow unless sanctioned by the government today.

So I and other Jewish leaders and Natan Sharansky, we are of the opinion that this new situation for Jews in Russia is becoming more and more dangerous, and in September, I called on the Jews of Russia, whoever can leave should leave the country.

About 30 percent of Russian Jews have left the country since the beginning of the war. We estimated more than 50,000 emigrated to Israel and another 30,000 left for other cities and countries in the Middle East, in Dubai, as well as Istanbul and other ex-Soviet capitals.

We are worried about the fate of the Jewish community there. Not everyone can leave, and we are worried about the state of the Jewish community there right now and both politically and economically, and we definitely can call the Jewish community of Russia today as a community in distress.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you very much, Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt, for very sobering presentation.

We are going to be pivoting now to Q&A with our commissioners. Allow me to use my temporary position here as the chair for the event to pick up on the last point that Rabbi Goldschmidt made, but I'd like to go to all of our panelists,

which is what's the trajectory of Russia's treatments of the various groups that have been talked about?

How much worse can it get if we may be so bold? So with permission, I'd like to perhaps ask Dennis Christensen, who paid already a stiff personal price for pursuing his religious beliefs, but if this war does—God forbid—drag on, and the trends continue, how much worse can it get for, in your case, for the Jehovah's Witnesses of Russia?

MR. CHRISTENSEN: If all of this continues, then, as I already said, it will be worse and worse. I remember in my court case, it was the first thing they tried really to do or to show that I was doing something extremist, and, of course, it doesn't work, and many times into the trial, I asked where is the extremism in this court case?

But still they give me six years of prison. Now they're not really trying anymore. It's just if you are belonging to the community of Jehovah's Witnesses, then you are guilty, and then

you will go to jail.

So, you know, before in a couple of years ago, they were trying to do something like justice. We are very justice here; we are doing that for the book. Now they are just doing it like, like they want to do it. We can see all over in Russia in many towns where the now court cases, many of my friends are in prison, many of all my faith believers are in prison right. And you know what? There is no basic ground in all these court cases against Jehovah's Witnesses.

Who will ever be that stupid to call a Jehovah's Witness an extremist? They're the most peaceful persons in the Earth, and trying to do as Jesus says, is to love your fellow as yourselves.

But I also see a little picture right now that in some of the court cases, Jehovah's Witnesses also been called not guilty. Justice has been, you know, it's normal justice, who has said that they have nothing to do with the tyrannical organization. This is just normal persons who are believing or living their religion.

But it doesn't work because later on, they appeal and appeal and appeal, and right now, we have two times that the Supreme Court of Russia have overruled these decisions where our fellow Witnesses were not guilty and now will go on and on.

So, as I already said, they are just playing a game. You know it's like a circus, where there is just clowns doing some things, everybody has to laugh, but nothing really happens.

So that will be my answer on that question that there will be, now they're not afraid of anything right now, and it's actually very, very sad. And I was thinking a lot about all my fellow believers, and also of the others, persons that I've heard about today. Actually much of this I didn't know maybe because it also has happened in the last year.

The last year I tried to build up my own life, but I would really like to say that I'm still sorry for all these people, and I'm afraid that it's now, you know, the ball is going everywhere.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

Dr. Denber, you're well traveled in the state, the former states of the former Soviet Union, and a long time expert on the region.

How much worse can it get?

MS. DENBER: Oh, gosh. Well, first, Commissioner Cooper, I have to thank you for the enhancement of my status. I don't have a Ph.D., but thank you for calling me doctor anyway. But in the name of transparency and integrity, I have to say that.

So, look, I hate to be a bringer of doom, but as bad as the situation is, I have to agree with Dennis Christensen: it can get a lot worse.

I think that there is always more room to escalate. I think that we could see, you know, longer prison sentences for Jehovah's Witnesses. We already see outrageously long prison sentences for Muslims, who are, you know, accused of membership in either Hizb ut-Tahrir, including in occupied Crimea, but also in Russia itself, many, many people accused, charged and sentenced and

thrown in jail for 15, 16, 17 years on, you know, on charges of terrorism or extremism for alleged membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir.

We could see more people being charged and longer sentences for people who are members of other Muslim religious organizations, such as—I'm going to mispronounce it—Nurdzhular.

We could see the authorities widen the net of people who they target so, you know, there are, as I said before, there are hundreds and hundreds of just Jehovah's Witnesses who have, you know, gone, who have been investigated or whose homes have been raided. Not all of them have gotten, you know, prison sentences.

We could see the numbers—we could see the net of people who they go after for, you know, to throw into prison, we could see that net widen. We could see them, I mean it's possible—they already do this—they could go after people just, and hit them with criminal charges and put them in prison for mere possession of leaflets.

That already happens in occupied Crimea.

We could see them doing that against Jehovah's Witnesses and members of other faiths. I wouldn't, I also wouldn't rule out that they might widen the net of types of non-of religious confessions that are not affiliated with the religious council, widen the net to include Baptists, Pentecostalists and others. That's also possible.

So really I think it could get a lot worse in terms of how broadly they cast the net, the numbers of people who get prosecuted, the sentences, the length of the sentences, and I think the kind of propaganda of hate and the propaganda of "the other," you know, of the "othering" individuals who are not part of, you know, the religious faiths that are affiliated with the, you know, with the official council.

We could see, you know, it's possible that state propaganda could also get so bad that there could be, you know, sort of more mobilization, more sort of public mobilization of religious hatred.

I hope that none of that comes to pass, but there always is room for it to get worse.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Rachel.

I'd like to open up right now to our fellow commissioners, if they have any questions, and also to tell our people, our witnesses who have come, that before the end of the session, we're going to give everyone an opportunity to make a closing comment.

I'd like to go to, recognize our moral leader, the person who when he was in Congress helped create this entity, Congressman Wolf, for your comments and questions.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Thank you, Vice Chair. I want to thank the witnesses very much.

This is very powerful testimony. I support Ukraine, and I support the Ukrainian people. My own feeling is the following, and I would appreciate your comments, if you think it makes any sense.

I would urge the administration to send former Secretary of State Jim Baker to Moscow to meet with the government leaders. Secretary Baker understands Russia perhaps better than any person

that's ever served in the government in modern times.

Joining him I think should be current CIA Ambassador Bill Burns, who was the Undersecretary under Jim Baker, but also was the American Ambassador in Russia, understands Russia, understands the Russian people.

And then I think the administration should ask Pope Francis to go to Moscow, meet with the Patriarch, to advocate on behalf of the Ukrainian people.

And lastly, I think part of this group should be Natan Sharansky. I can still remember on the Glienicke Bridge where he zigzagged back and forth. He understands. He was in Perm Camp 35. He understands as well as anyone. I think they should be asked to be part of the group to do this quickly.

Your thoughts?

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Why don't we start with Professor Vovk.

MR. VOVK: Sorry. I lost part of the

connection. Could you please briefly repeat the question? I lost the last 30 seconds.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Well, the question is quite specific. Congressman Wolf outlined some very specific steps that the current administration should and could be undertaking in order to communicate directly to the leadership in Russia, as well as trying to get the Vatican more directly involved.

Your thoughts about this approach?

MR. VOVK: Well, first of all, I think that Russian religious leaders, many Russian religious leaders, are deeply involved in the protests of supporting of war, I think because of different motives. It's not just one part.

So in, certainly, in my view, the politics must be composed of two directions. The first one that there should be restrictions against those religious leaders who support the war, and they should understand that this public support of the Russian authorities, of Putin, of what is going on in the Ukraine could be somehow, they could get

some negative, negative reaction.

The other trajectory that, of course, the United States government and the United States organizations could support those leaders and could strengthen those leaders who raise voices against the war, but I presume that most of those leaders are now outside of Russia.

The combination of these two politics, that might be a successful way.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

Rabbi Goldschmidt, since you made the difficult and historic decision to urge Jews to leave Russia, and you've been involved in many international efforts to be opposed to the war, what are your thoughts about Congressman Wolf's suggestion of a more robust American and religious leadership involvement?

RABBI GOLDSCHMIDT: People-to-people diplomacy is an accepted way of solving conflicts. The problem is that the people in Russia right now are disenfranchised and are pressured by the government and are fearful to take this position.

So the question is if any foreign leaders, foreign religious leaders, can change, can change the facts on the ground? That's a big question.

However, we shouldn't forget, and I think, it is very important, today there is a Russian opposition. The Russian opposition is half in jail in Russia and the other half is in exile outside of Russia.

I think the United States and the West should do much more to support the opposition because at the end of the day, they will bring change to the country.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

Commissioner Kleinbaum, I believe you had a question.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Thank you very much, and, like the others, I'm deeply moved by the testimony, and all of us are following the news just with horror.

Several of you implied this, but I just thought—and I'd like to ask you to address it directly. What are the stakes now in Ukraine

itself? We're at a position here where we're told in our news reports that the support for American support for Ukraine might be softening.

What's the implication for religious freedom in Ukraine were Ukraine to lose this war with Russia? In terms of advice to us and our positions with what we advise or recommend to our government, what's your thinking about that directly?

Any of the witnesses, I'd love to hear your thoughts?

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Rachel.

MS. DENBER: Look, that's an excellent question. Look, a lot is at stake in Ukraine right now. Our organization has been focused on the impact of the war on civilians, the impact of the atrocities, sorry, the toll that the war has taken on civilians, the war crimes, the atrocities, the potential crimes against humanity, the bombing and shelling of civilian areas, the widespread, widespread torture, and forced disappearances, forced transfer of civilians in areas that are

occupied by Russia.

So our organization has been really focused on documenting this and pressing for justice. I think we already heard from Professor Vovk about the impact that Russian occupation has had on religious freedom in areas that are already under Russian control.

All we need to do is look at what happened to religious freedom in Crimea after Russia began its occupation in 2014.

Hand-in-hand with the effort to persecute and imprison or drive into exile anybody who opposed the occupation, the journalists or Crimean Tatars, you know, there was also an intensification of efforts against Jehovah's Witnesses in occupied Crimea, and I think that really serves as an example of what can happen in Ukraine if Russia, you know, continues to have control in occupied areas and/or extends its area of occupation.

We already saw what happened. We already see what has happened in areas that were under, effectively under Russia's proxies in Donetsk and

Luhansk regions since 2014. You know, persecution of numerous religious activists.

We documented some of these cases in some of our earlier work, so I think that we could only expect that to worsen.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

Professor Vovk.

MR. VOVK: Thank you.

I think two points, two points important here.

First of all, we need to understand that Ukraine and Russia, both were Soviet. Both Orthodox majority with shared history, culture and especially political culture. They provide two post-Soviet alternatives. The Ukrainian system with all its problems, defects, and so on, is still democratic, is still pluralist, and it's still based on, you know, freedom of opinion and free market of ideas, and so on, which means that this war, of course, for us in Ukraine, it's, first of all, about Ukrainian sovereignty, about Ukrainian preservation of Ukrainian statehood.

But it's also about two systems, which one is based on freedom, and another one is based on un-free, which means that if Russia wins in this war, it means they will get less freedom in the region and in the world.

And the second point is that, again, we need to understand that Russia provides a sort of example of bad practices in the region and globally. Many people have already mentioned this anti-extremist legislation, with all these punishments for just blaming religious superiority, which is part and parcel of religious, freedom of religion and speech, and so on.

And we may expect if Russia succeeds, if Putin succeeds in this war, it means that those, that legislation, those political practices, will be expanded because Russia will sort of set up or frame the trajectory not only for itself but also for Central Asian countries or for Belarus or for countries, Asian countries, and so on.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

Well, we are coming close to the end of

our time, and I thought the best way for us to use it is to go back to our phenomenal witnesses and ask them to actually give us some homework and USCIRF, meaning can you each give us one specific idea or initiative, building on Congressman Wolf's comments?

Rabbi, what would you have us do, as a person who is still in the middle of this tragic mix?

RABBI GOLDSCHMIDT: I think that what is important is to know that the many in Russia, and I think that 90 percent of the Jewish community in Russia and outside of Russia does not support the war, is to support those who are not supporting the war and are against the war inside of Russia and outside of Russia as well.

There's been since the beginning of the war, there's been a wave of not only speaking about sanctions against leading oligarchs and others, but against many regular Russians who left Russia and tried to restart their lives and it became increasingly difficult for them to do so outside of

Russia.

I think that the policy to support those who are against the war and those who want a new system and a new life and peace in the world, those people are to be supported.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

Dennis, you're not an international diplomat and you have a life now, but you do have the life experience of having paid the price. What is the one takeaway that you'd like to leave with the commissioners of USCIRF going forward?

MS. DENBER: Well, first of all, I would like to say, to be honest, it's a very difficult question for me to answer because I really don't know.

After living in Russia many years, I had a great taste of their culture. I love many of the people who are still living there. I love the people in Ukraine. So it's very difficult for me to say what should you do further on?

I would then say one thing. I would really say that I'm appreciating all that you are

doing now because the more that we are talking about these problems that are here, maybe then we can solve it. I really like the thing that you were talking about, also that if you have this kind of conversation, I think this could also open up for many things.

So please continue telling things about, telling people about what's happening in Russia, in Ukraine, and I think also that we should not forget that many people, you know, here in Denmark, many people think that if you are Russian, then you're supporting everything. Of course, we're not.

We have also to remember that ordinary person, what can he do? Actually he cannot do so much things. So we have to also put this hate, hate to Russian people out, and then we also like this, that you should not judge a person because of his nationality but for his acts or for his deeds.

I think you are doing very good work, and I would really like to say that I appreciate being here and thanks a lot.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

Professor Vovk, you do have the credentials. You're a lawyer, international lawyer, and involved directly in these issues. We didn't talk about it today, but could you talk to the issue of accountability? When this war is over, who should be held accountable? Where should—should there be any trials?

For example, what role would human rights activists here in the states and around the world have on this?

MR. VOVK: Well, of course, I think it's the responsibility of Russian regime for this war because the war has created enormous threats to human rights in the region, and we see evidences of war crimes. We see evidences of rapes, murders of civilians, of significant effect on the cultural heritage of Ukraine.

It's not just about religious properties. This is also important. It's also about museums. It's also about educational institutions. In Kharkiv, for example, the place where I lived, 2,000 of schools have been destroyed—sorry, through

the whole Ukraine, 2,000 of schools have been destroyed.

Can you imagine, you know, the effect of this on kids, Ukrainian kids, that do like to go home and they will have no place to study.

Several of Kharkiv universities were simply ruined, including their leading one, the Kharkiv National University, which meant, the Ukrainian government now promotes the initiative of special tribunal against those involved in the war. It includes, first of all, political leadership and the military involved in war crimes.

But, of course, we should recognize that the community, so-called, so to say, of those who might be responsible, are much broader, and this is coming back to your first question about the trajectory of Russia.

The trajectory of Russia is the trajectory of personal dictatorship, which means there is nothing that could not be potentially done in order to preserve Putin's power.

And we also need to bear in mind that even

if regime, Russia's regime, is changed, even if the religious restrictions have been removed, it won't change much because the Russian society has been poisoned with this narrative of so-called traditional values, with this narrative of Russian superiority, with this narrative that Russia, Russians have been offended by the West, by Ukraine, by all countries around.

And we must recognize that this is for decades, and this leads to my second sort of concluding comment, that we should probably stop thinking about post-Soviet era as through Russian lens, through Russian problems, through internal Russian agenda, and we should probably focus more on other post-Soviet countries and Eastern European countries, not only Ukraine, although Ukraine is the main litigant now, but also Baltic states, but also Poland, but also other countries around Russia, and do something that can prevent potential or real problems that Russia can create or has been creating now for those countries.

Just a small example at the end. In

Kharkiv, there is a small community of Crimean Karaites. It's a very specific Crimean Jewish culture, and they had, before the war, they had kenesa, their religious building. That religious building was the only kenesa in Ukraine beyond Crimea.

That building was damaged and ruined after the full invasion began, which means that now the whole community has no building for prayer whatsoever, and this is a very tiny religious minority. They have no money to rebuild this building, which probably means that they will just disappear from religious landscape.

You cannot fix it by, you know, making some legislation or just changing political regime in Russia. It's probably forever. And this is, for me, personally, this is the main focus.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

Before we come to you, Rachel, for your final comment, I'd like to recognize and ask fellow Commissioner Frederick Davie to make a comment and ask questions.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Thank you. And I realize the hour is late. Just let me thank the witnesses for their testimony, very compelling and moving testimony.

I am interested in the issue of international advocacy for religious prisoners of conscience, and Mr. Christensen I know, and I want to offer my sympathy and respect for what you and others have gone through.

But I would be curious, if we do have time, if there is any real influence of international advocacy for religious prisoners of conscience, and—as USCIRF and other organizations have tried to do—is this an important factor in helping to get people released from prison or at least not be treated as harshly when they are incarcerated?

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Commissioner Davie, and so we'll come to you with that question, Rachel, if you can respond to it and also give your closing comments?

MS. DENBER: Thank you very much for the

question.

It's an excellent question. It's a question we ask ourselves everyday when we do this work. How can we be most effective in seeing the release of and ensuring the release of persecuted religious figures behind bars? It's the question I ask myself everyday when Dennis Christensen, when you were behind bars, what can we do to bring about your freedom?

It looked, I think that there isn't, there isn't a direct path, you know, a direct linear path, if there is this intervention, then that moves the Kremlin to release somebody.

I think there it's an indirect path. I think that eventually, eventually international advocacy is absolutely crucial for, you know, for a number of reasons.

First, I hope it's, I think it's the case—Dennis, you can correct us—I think it's really important to the morale of people who have been persecuted and who are behind bars, it's important for them to know that they are not forgotten, that

they are not alone, that there is an outside world there fighting for their release.

I think that's also important for their families, to boost their morale, of what could be a very, you know, a very long and terrible ordeal.

I think, look, sometimes it's important to do it even if the Kremlin seems impervious to urgings or to criticism or to sanction. Sometimes it is just the right thing to do. Right?

And that leads me to my final remarks. I was so moved by everybody's testimonies, and I agree vigorously with many of the recommendations that have been, that have already been made, and rather than repeat them here, I'll just reinforce what I, you know, what I said during my opening testimony, is that, you know, the future, there needs to be justice for atrocities, war crimes, crimes against humanity, that have taken place in Ukraine, and this is something that Human Rights Watch is pushing for very, you know, quite vigorously, whether it's through the—and supporting—whether it's through the International

Criminal Court, through the, you know, the Ukrainian justice system, or through, you know, universal jurisdiction mechanisms.

And I, and at the same time, you know, the question of where is the future of fundamental freedoms in Russia, that's going to be, that future lies with Russia's independent activists, the human rights movement, but still does exist, you know, inside Russia.

There are some people who have stayed behind and, of course, there's the Russian human rights movement that is in exile. They need support so that they can continue to document violations of religious freedom inside Russia, so they continue their work providing legal assistance, providing, doing documentation, providing legal assistance and providing other assistance to political prisoners and their families.

So they need to be supported in that work, and they, and I hope that you will be able to provide that.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

And finally let me come back to Rabbi Goldschmidt for his final comment, and, as he does, before you do that, on behalf of our chair, Nury Turkel, and all our commissioners, we want to thank the amazing witnesses.

What you've delivered in terms of your knowledge, life experience, and frankly suffering has been quite impactful, and we hope sometime soon in the future, our witness from the Crimean Tatar community will actually be available to come to Washington and actually identify himself or herself and testify.

Rabbi Goldschmidt.

RABBI GOLDSCHMIDT: Yeah. Thank you, Abe.

Forgive me, out of order, a last word. I just would like to strengthen the words of the closing statement, which said I met yesterday one of the women who is leading one of the organizations helping prisoners of conscience and political prisoners and religious prisoners in Russia, Belorussia.

We have about 2,000 of them registered, and she said that once Natan Sharansky was asked how he set in prison in Perm, in the gulag in Perm, and they asked how did the director of the prison, how did he deal with him? He said he was very nice to me, and this person was known as a very difficult chap, and this woman, she, she went to visit this person who used to be the director of the gulag in Soviet times.

And told him, you know, you had a very famous prisoner, Natan Sharansky. He says, yes, I know, he became the president of some country, of Israel, but I knew, I knew when he was in prison that a lot of people cared about him. Therefore, I always took care of him.

So that's, I think, a very important statement that the mindset of people in charge of the prisons today, if they know that the Western world cares about those prisoners of conscience, of religious prisoners, and prisoners of the opposition, their fate in prison is going to be much better than otherwise.

Thank you for letting me add these lines.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you very much.

And on behalf of our chair, Nury Turkel, and all the commissioners, I want to thank Erin Singshinsuk, our boss, our Executive Director, and her fantastic staff that works 24-7 to make sure we have our information, and now we have further inspiration for each of us to do more individually and to act collectively.

Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 12:06 p.m. EDT, the hearing was adjourned.]